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## Judge who helped start drug, mental health courts retiring

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Washoe District Court Judge Peter Breen, the longest sitting district judge in Nevada history, who is widely respected as the chief architect of the drug and mental health courts, said Wednesday that he is leaving his post beginning next month.

The 66-year-old Breen, with the district court for 32 years, said he decided to retire to have more free time. He said he hopes to become a senior judge "to help out wherever I can, hopefully with the speciality courts," which he said were the highlight of his long career.

"It's been my passion," he said. "I don't know if I would have stayed all these years without it. It renewed my interest and love for this job."

Gov. Kenny Guinn, who will appoint a new judge to fill the vacancy, praised Breen's commitment to the state and the judicial system.

"Judge Breen has served the citizens of Nevada with distinction and honor for 32 years," Guinn said during a break from hearings at the Pardons Board in Carson City. "On behalf of the citizens of Nevada, I commend Judge Breen for a job well done and wish him the best in his future endeavors."

Washoe District Chief Judge Jerry Polaha said he was sorry to see Breen step down, although the chief judge said he expects Breen will still be around the courthouse for a while.

"Pete is an institution. He's a fixture," Polaha said, adding that he recalls arguing cases before Breen years ago when he was a young lawyer.

Nevada Supreme Court Justice James Hardesty said Breen's departure, although limited, will be a loss.

"Without question, Judge Breen is one of the finest district court judges to ever serve the state," Hardesty said. "Washoe County and the state will miss the wisdom and sense of fairness that he has displayed for more than 30 years on the bench.

"The biggest loss to the district court will be the institutional memory that he possesses. It was of enormous benefit to me when I was chief judge. But thankfully he'll be around as a senior judge. It's really good to see he and (wife) Kathy share some life away from the courthouse.

"He has clearly earned it."

Washoe District Attorney Richard Gammick, who has held his post for 23 years, agreed, recalling that Breen was one of the younger judges in the district when he began.

"I think the world of Judge Breen," the prosecutor said. "My first jury trial was in front of him. I found him to be a challenging judge, extremely fair. He keeps a formality to the court that a lot of judges don't do anymore. He believes in a formal courtroom. I like that."

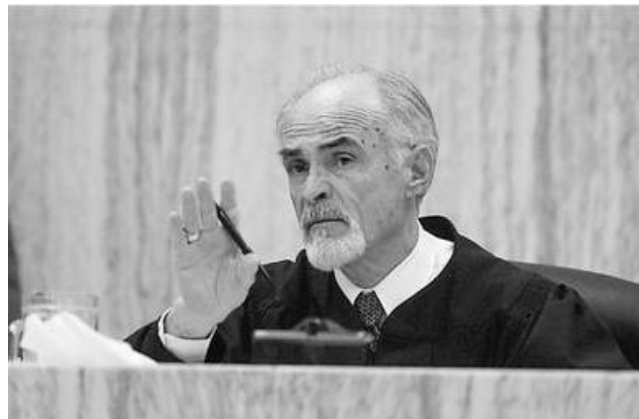
Breen's term runs until 2008.

Guinn will choose a new judge from a list of three lawyers recommended by the Commission on Judicial Selection. Applications will be available soon, and interviews with commissioners are expected to begin about two months after the application process begins, said Bill Gang, spokesman for the Supreme Court.

The drug court, one of the first in the nation, was created in 1995. Under the program, designed by Breen and Clark County District Judge Jack Lehman, defendants enter drug treatment and if successful, often can have their records sealed and charges dismissed.

"It's uniquely effective in helping people rebuild their lives," Breen said.

And the mental health court, championed by Breen, started in 2001. He said the court was needed to address the growing number of mentally ill people



Washoe District Court Judge Peter Breen, pictured in March, was praised for his wisdom, sense of fairness and his institutional knowledge (LIZ MARGERUM/RGJ FILE)

who clog the criminal justice system.

Keeping mentally ill people out of jail would be one of the many benefits, Breen told lawmakers at the time, as he sought support for the new court. With supervision, mentally ill people could stay on track and out of jail. The court provides oversight to ensure that defendants are getting the treatment they need.

Assemblywoman Sheila Leslie, D-Reno, who co-wrote the bill to establish the court, said she has lived in awe of Breen's work.

"He's really given a lifeline to severely mentally ill people and has given a last chance to drug addicts, many of whom were able to turn their lives around.

"Who knows how many lives Judge Breen has saved through his work in these courts? Thousands."

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